

Editorial

by Renzo Carli*, Rosa Maria Paniccia**

The elections for the European Parliament have just finished. The results show the left in decline all over Europe and the centre-right advancing.

This fact seems to confirm a shift to the right in the values that are the basis of living together on our continent: the marginal importance of solidarity and tolerance, the increase in concern about security, fear of job losses and hostility towards those who seem to be undermining the local employment market, intolerance of situations deviating from the expected norms, rejection of multi-ethnic communities, increasing prejudices about social diversity in all its manifestations. Italy is not alone on this issue.

We wish to underline the importance of this fact: the shift to the right of the culture we live in directly involves the psychology professions to a worrying degree. Remember that the demand society addresses to psychologists is mainly the demand for intervention to promote the integration of diversities: the integration between citizen and government administration, the integration of differences in gender and generation, in intellectual, motor and cultural abilities at school and in training, the integration of competences, cultures and ethnicities at work and in the community, and the integration of the different religious creeds in society. These problems involve a different competence and a broader attention than those usually devoted to mental illness alone, to its diagnosis and treatment.

For about thirty years our research group has been following the changes in our country's culture. Until the mid-nineties in this culture there were two opposing tendencies: one based on the values of growth and competence, the other oriented to membership of power groups and to familism. In the last fifteen years there has emerged a progressive dominance of the latter culture, where the values of individualistic or familistic egoism are found alongside an uncontrolled valorization of power without competence, of appearances that procure privileges, with the widespread willingness to pursue a façade of well-being, a sort of rampant mass elitism. The values of developing and living together are relegated to a small minority.

Along with this tendency, there has been an increase in anomie, or the lack of confidence in the future and the feeling that there are no rules. In our opinion, the withdrawal into familism and power groups, as well as the call for more controls over all that is strange and deviant, are deeply related to this disorientation, which prompts a defensive reaction instead of encouraging the construction of shared meanings and values. In this sense, remember the dramatic aphasia of two important social players: the political Left and the intellectuals.

All this is accompanied by an increasingly enhanced mass-media culture, by the spectacularization of events, by the simplified presentation of reality in exaggerated emotional dichotomies where everything translates into the friend-foe dialectic. It is a sort of widespread spectacularized Manichaeism, which stifles any form of thought open to problematisation and in-depth examination of what is being experienced. There is less and less irony, and it is replaced by the sarcasm associated with intolerance of any disagreement. One might repeat *Mala tempora currunt*. But also, like Livy, *tempus est etiam conari maiora*.

How is Italian psychology reacting to this cultural situation?

A deep division is splitting the culture and practice of psychology in our country. It is a clash between a psychology based on power and conformism and a psychology oriented towards

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fostering thought and autonomy in development. In describing this conflict, we are taking a stance midway between the two positions. Let us think of psychotherapy: the emphasis on the diagnosis and therapy of mental disorders makes it increasingly clear that the psychotherapy relationship is seen as a relationship where the psychotherapist claims the same power as the doctor towards the patient. With one fundamental difference: the doctor uses his "professional power" to make a therapeutic intervention possible, from the prescription for medication to the general anaesthetic. The psychotherapist, instead, uses his professional power as a tool for its own sake, to change the other person's way of thinking, acting and experiencing the relationship. This power intervention is justified by the results that must necessarily be revealed, so as to have society's approval for this operation in psychotherapy. Hence the emphasis on research into the outcomes of psychotherapy, in all its 'scientific' aspects. Power, on the other hand, has made a brusque entrance into psychological training, for example in company training as well as rehabilitation. It is a slow, but seemingly unstoppable, slide.

Another manifestation of power in psychology is visible in the loss of medium or long term perspective. The psychologist seems to serve only in the short term: change, a theme dear to the psychologists and sociopsychologists of the sixties and seventies, is seen today as immediate change, of cognitive more than emotional aspects, related more to contingent behavior than to the symbolic modalities of elaborating one's experience. The psychologist seems impatient, tending to push for change, interested in attaining a quick result, aiming to arouse the other person's immediate satisfaction.

Then there is a type of psychology that sets medium to long term goals: in psychotherapy as well as in training, in the psychosocial intervention as well as in processes of rehabilitation for returning to the community. The mediation between intervention and change necessarily lies in thinking of emotions. It is the dynamics of emotional symbolization that underlies the work of the psychologist: his/her own symbolization of the relationship as well as that of those who share the professional relationship.

Individual or relationship; success or medium term policy; personal visibility or development of living together; deficit correction or promotion of growth; thought at the service of research or research at the service of thought; verification at the service of professional power or verification at the service of the client; comforting conformism or conflicting analysis of the relationship; espousal of the most popular models or pursuit of a psychological specificity. These and many other dilemmas are, in our view, where our psychology, in particular the clinical component of Italian psychology, is floundering.